



# mirror

## **2019 to 2022**

# **Strategic Plan**

Amplify impact • Expand audience • Build financial sustainability

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## **Introduction:**

Journalism is critical for informing the public; an informed public is critical to a thriving democracy; journalism is critical for a thriving democracy.

Yet, in the current era of “fake news,” the continued contraction of legacy media, and news media fragmentation the quality, breadth, and depth of journalism are eroding around the country and in Connecticut. CT Mirror has been and continues to be an exception to this trend.

We have built one of the most trusted journalism brands in the state, our audience is expanding, and reader financial support is increasing. Recent reader research indicates that 58% of respondents said that if CT Mirror ceased to exist they would feel they would have “lost a source of news that you can’t find anywhere else.”

This strategic plan:

- Reflects a shared vision.
- Assumes improvement/growth/change and will primarily focus on what needs to be changed, improved or created.
- Identifies opportunities for CT Mirror to leverage the strengths and successes of its first ten years to amplify impact, expand audience, and build financial sustainability.
- Is a guide to our decision-making over the next three years.
- Is used to determine needs for funding, internal investment and programmatic direction.
- Affirms a common set of values and language for board and staff.

## **Key Trends:**

- Recent research conducted by the Institute for Nonprofit News (INN) concludes that nonprofit news has established itself over the past decade as a fast-growing field within journalism, producing original and in-depth reporting and has enjoyed steady growth over the last ten years, particularly recently.
- Like legacy media, nonprofit publishers share challenges around revenue and audience development.
- The nonprofit field is still highly dependent on charitable giving, with grants and donations accounting for 90 percent of total revenue (which is exactly the percentage of CT Mirror revenue). To reduce that dependence on contributed income efforts to diversify revenue streams, a key indicator of financial stability, are a priority.
- Journalism is changing rapidly – successful nonprofits are innovative and experimenting with new approaches to reporting news, telling stories, and distributing their work.
- Diversity, collaboration, and reader engagement are important values and strategies for audience growth, deeper impact, and financial stability.



## Summary of Strategic Plan



## Definitions:

- **Journalism:** The gathering, analyzing, presenting, and distributing verifiable news and information to help people make the best possible decisions about their lives, their communities, and their governments (adapted from American Press Institute definition of “journalism”).

Our conception of journalism includes three distinct elements:

- Reporting / gathering news and information (cultivating sources, conducting research, listening and observing people and events, developing expertise, investigating, analyzing).
  - Presenting news and information (content creation or telling the story, through the written word, data, charts, photography, graphics, video, animation, audio, interactive tools).
  - Distributing news and information (website, live events, online events, radio, podcasts, TV, video platforms, social media, speeches, trainings).
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- **Enterprise reporting:** Explainers or analysis written off the news, investigative reporting, or other evergreen stories (in contrast to “incremental news” which is typically a response to a press release, press conference, meeting, event, or publication of a report).

### Recommended Vision / Mission:

- **Vision:** A stronger democracy in which all Connecticut residents can more effectively participate in the development of public policy and hold government accountable for understanding and addressing the needs of the people of Connecticut.
- **Mission:** Produce original, in-depth, nonpartisan journalism that informs Connecticut residents about the impact of public policy, holds government accountable, and amplifies diverse voices and perspectives.

### Our Vision for The Connecticut Mirror:

- CT Mirror will **continue to invest in and expand reporting efforts** across a range of topics and **implement innovative approaches for increasing civic discourse** and engagement.
- CT Mirror will be **bold, innovative, and creative in developing ways to share and disseminate our stories** and increase reader engagement.
- CT Mirror **readership will grow**, be more representative of our state's diverse demographics, and be more engaged in our efforts to source and inform our reporting.
- CT Mirror will **increase its financial sustainability and resilience**, with support from an array of local and national funders, individual contributors, and earned revenue opportunities.
- CT Mirror's **skilled staff, notably our greatest asset, will expand** to add new competencies and perspectives. Staff will be a high-functioning, collegial team who are supported to grow and evolve, both individually and collectively.
- CT Mirror's **Board of Directors will be actively engaged** in building relationships and acting as ambassadors for CT Mirror's mission and efforts.

### The Connecticut Mirror's Values:

- **Independence:** Independence is central to our work. CT Mirror reporting will be truthful, accurate, and fair and represent our best independent observations and analysis, not influenced by our own opinions.
- **Respect:** We value and appreciate all viewpoints. We engage with each other, our readers, our partners, and supporters with deep humility and appreciation for the contribution of each individual. We encourage civility in our exchanges and dialogue.
- **Integrity:** We are stewards of the trust placed in us by our readers and supporters. We operate in a transparent, ethical manner with deep commitment to our core mission.
- **Innovative:** We embrace new ideas for advancing the quality of our reporting, distributing our journalism, and engaging readers.
- **Diversity:** We embed diverse voices in our work in a meaningful way to address the inequities in communities across our state, particularly among communities of color.

## Overarching Strategic Goal:

**Share more expertise in more ways to maximize impact and differentiate CT Mirror from other news organizations.**

1. **Strategy 1:** Deepen and expand the expertise CT Mirror shares with its audience.
  - a. Place greater emphasis on enterprise reporting:
    - i. Establish criteria to loosely guide story selection.
    - ii. Place greater emphasis on story development.
  - b. Add new beats to expand our coverage focus:
    - i. Select beats based on reader interest and alignment with mission.
    - ii. Add editorial capacity as coverage expands.
2. **Strategy 2:** Innovate how CT Mirror packages and distributes content to engage current readers more deeply and to attract new readers.
  - a. Extend storytelling beyond the written word:
    - i. Better photography
    - ii. Embedded audio and video
    - iii. Greater variety of data visualization techniques (e.g., charts, infographics, animation)
    - iv. Interactive features
  - b. Distribute CT Mirror's work through more platforms both on-site and off-site:
    - i. More targeted newsletters
    - ii. Social media
    - iii. Podcasts
    - iv. Webinars
    - v. Online / in-person events and speaking engagements
    - vi. Trainings

## **Supporting Strategic Goals:**

### **Supporting Goal 1: Reflect greater diversity.**

- Strategy 1: Bring greater diversity to the CT Mirror staff and newsroom.
- Strategy 2: Diversify the perspectives and topics reflected in CT Mirror reporting to increase relevance to ALL Connecticut residents.
- Strategy 3: Enhance the use of Viewpoints as a vehicle for bringing more diverse voices to the site.

### **Supporting Goal 2: Seek and embrace more collaboration.**

- Strategy 1: Extend reach and impact through reporting partnerships and coordination with local news organizations.
- Strategy 2: Make greater use of relevant partner content to keep the site fresh.
- Strategy 3: Identify / prioritize opportunities for collaborating with non-news organizations.

### **Supporting Goal 3: Build revenue generation capabilities.**

- Strategy 1: Invest in business-building capacity, with an emphasis on investing in fund development capacity.
- Strategy 2: Launch and grow a membership campaign to build loyalty and engagement.
- Strategy 3: Grow brand awareness and brand understanding across the state through a variety of marketing approaches to build audience.

### **Supporting Goal 4: Strengthen board capacity.**

- Strategy 1: Set and review annual goals for the Board aligned with the strategic framework.
- Strategy 2: Support the Publisher through Board relationships and active engagement in fund development efforts.
- Strategy 3: Diversify the Board in terms of skills, relationships, geography, and perspective.
- Strategy 4: Strengthen the committee structure.

### **Supporting Goal 5: Strengthen organizational capacity.**

- Strategy 1: Create systems to monitor, track, and report impact and financial performance.
- Strategy 2: Establish standardized human resources processes.
- Strategy 3: Upgrade technology tools and professional development to deepen staff capability.

See Appendix B for potential tactics by goal for possible inclusion in the Operational Plan that will be developed by staff after the strategic plan is adopted.

## **Appendix A: Current Mission**

### **Current mission as reflected in 990 (civic engagement):**

The Connecticut Mirror's mission is to increase the level of civic engagement among the state's residents so that they can more effectively participate in the development of public policy and hold public officials accountable for understanding and addressing the state's needs.

### **Current mission as reflected in by-laws (educate):**

Educate the public about the workings of government, to provide access to information and educational resources to the public, and to educate the next generation of journalists.



## Appendix B: Additional Potential Tactics by Goal for Possible Inclusion in Operational Plan

Supporting Goal 1: Reflect greater diversity.	
<b>Strategy 1:</b> Bring greater diversity to the CT Mirror staff and newsroom.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Network through minority journalism organizations immediately, well before the need to hire.</li> <li>• Explore creating a fellowship for journalists of color.</li> <li>• Staff training to create a culture that welcomes new staff from a different culture.</li> </ul>
<b>Strategy 2:</b> Diversify the perspectives and topics reflected in CT Mirror reporting to increase relevance to ALL Connecticut residents.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop plan for achieving DEI objectives, addressing board and staff training, topic selection, broader sourcing, audience expansion, partnerships, hiring, and board recruitment.</li> <li>• Create reader engagement/outreach position to increase readership, drive story development, generate story tips.</li> </ul>
<b>Strategy 3:</b> Enhance the use of Viewpoints as a vehicle for bringing more diverse voices to the site.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create reader engagement/outreach position</li> <li>• Create special sections or features in Viewpoints to generate dialogue around issues that are particularly salient in communities of color.</li> <li>• Promote the special sections on home page and in newsletter.</li> </ul>
Supporting Goal 2: Seek and embrace collaboration.	
<b>Strategy 1:</b> Extend reach and impact through reporting partnerships and coordination with local news organizations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build on Cities Project experience to explore topics in depth.</li> <li>• Co-publish statewide stories and localized versions.</li> </ul>
<b>Strategy 2:</b> Make greater use of relevant partner content to keep the site fresh.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In-state partners (CT Public, NH Independent, community media).</li> <li>• Broad range of topic specific nonprofit publisher content.</li> </ul>
<b>Strategy 3:</b> Identify / prioritize opportunities for collaborating with non-news organizations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrate local and national leadership through relationships with a diverse range of partners.</li> <li>• Develop a relational map to better understand the range of relationships to be cultivated and to then prioritize efforts (e.g., colleges, community organizations in underserved communities, recruiting sources, nonprofit and advocacy organizations, industry associations, data organizations).</li> </ul>
Supporting Goal 3: Build revenue generation capabilities.	
<b>Strategy 1:</b> Invest in business-building capacity, with an emphasis on investing in fund development capacity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mount a specific fundraising effort around building business capacity.</li> <li>• Create an innovation fund to attract major gifts and fund new journalism and engagement initiatives.</li> <li>• Develop a multi-year fund development plan including major donor cultivation, foundation giving, and events.</li> <li>• Develop a signature fund development event.</li> <li>• Develop engagement opportunity with financial advisors to increase donations from high-net-worth individuals.</li> <li>• Create additional meaningful sponsorship opportunities.</li> <li>• Introduce a planned giving initiative.</li> </ul>

<b>Strategy 2:</b> Launch and grow a membership campaign to build loyalty and engagement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create member benefits to drive membership.</li> <li>• Develop capacity and tools for sustaining members and moving them up to a higher member level.</li> </ul>
<b>Strategy 3:</b> Grow brand awareness and brand understanding across the state through a variety of marketing approaches to build audience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leverage emerging social media tools.</li> <li>• Invest in retargeting advertising campaigns</li> <li>• Enhance search capabilities (SEO).</li> </ul>
<b>Supporting Goal 4: Strengthen board capacity.</b>	
<b>Strategy 1:</b> Set and review annual goals for the Board aligned with the strategic framework.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct a formal review of the strategic plan annually.</li> <li>• Conduct a Board self-assessment every two years.</li> </ul>
<b>Strategy 2:</b> Support the Publisher through Board relationships and active engagement in fund development efforts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Board training related to fundraising.</li> <li>• Formal processes for identifying and leveraging board relationships that could lead to fund development.</li> <li>• Design and maintain a robust member directory with photos, bios, interests, and relationships.</li> </ul>
<b>Strategy 3:</b> Diversify the Board in terms of skills, relationships, geography, and perspective.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruit based on gaps and strategic priorities.</li> <li>• Refine matrix assessment of skills.</li> <li>• Develop a formal process to build and review a pipeline of possible candidates.</li> <li>• Create opportunities to foster social cohesion.</li> </ul>
<b>Strategy 4:</b> Strengthen the committee structure.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop charters for all committees.</li> <li>• Provide clear expectation to ensure the level of commitment of committee leaders and members is sufficient to meet committee responsibilities.</li> <li>• Consider recruitment of non-Board members to support committee work as needed</li> </ul>
<b>Supporting Goal 5: Strengthen organizational capacity.</b>	
<b>Strategy 1:</b> Create systems to monitor and report impact.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Define desired impact and metrics for measuring impact.</li> <li>• Establish standardized process for reporting impact internally and to the community.</li> <li>• Conduct short surveys to understand reader demographics, interests, behavior, and perceptions.</li> </ul>
<b>Strategy 2:</b> Establish standardized human resources processes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compensation structure.</li> <li>• Performance review process.</li> </ul>
<b>Strategy 3:</b> Upgrade technology tools and professional development to deepen staff capability.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Phones, computers, back-up devices.</li> <li>• Conferences and courses.</li> </ul>

## **Appendix C: Creating the Plan**

A Design Team comprised of members of the Board and staff leadership was formed in October 2018 to develop a three-year strategic plan for the CT Mirror. Fio Partners, a nonprofit consulting firm, was selected to support the process.

The strategic planning process began with the design of the information base for planning. The design included opportunities to gather observations of the organization from a variety of perspectives, including staff, community partners, and industry experts. The information base, which was gathered from October 2018 - February 2019, included:

- Organizational Insights
  - A Board survey to assess the effectiveness of board interactions and functions and solicit input into strategic planning priorities.
  - A historical analysis of financial ratios and trends.
  - Analysis of reader survey conducted in 2018.
- Staff Insights
  - Interviews with staff members.
- External Insights
  - Expert and supporter stakeholder interviews gathered feedback.
  - Comparable organization information was gathered more other independent news organizations as well as for the Connecticut based players.

The Design Team convened every four to six weeks to review and discuss completed analyses and oversee activities relative to the information gathering. The Board and members of the Design Team met in March to review the information base, offer input into the strategic direction of the organization, and shape priorities for the next three years.

The strategic plan's framework is anchored in the information base and the strategic direction articulated during the retreat. Staff leadership then used the framework as a starting point for a structured conversation and collaborative revision process. The resulting strategic plan will inform annual goal setting for the Publisher and the Board, who will also jointly track implementation progress by monitoring the plan's agreed upon key results over time.